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RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0027
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 002115

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/PASCUAL/RAMCHAND, DRL
FOR PINA, S/P FOR DEATHERAGE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2018
TAGS: [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: PAPAL NUNCIO: GOI DENIED PRIESTS ACCESS TO GAZA TO
HOLD SOLE CATHOLIC MASS

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Latin Patriarchate Chancellor Fr. Humam Khzuz and Papal Nuncio contacts in Jerusalem told PolOff November 24 that GOI officials denied the Nuncio (Archbishop Antonio Franco), Khzuz, and Patriarchate secretary Fr. Shawki Batrian access to Gaza early November 23, causing the cancellation of Sunday Catholic Mass in Gaza. Khzuz said Gaza's main Catholic priest, Fr. Manuel, is on leave outside Gaza for the first time since 2000, requiring the Patriarchate to provide a substitute to perform Mass. Khzuz said the Nuncio informed the Israeli MFA of their intended visit on November 18. He said COGAT authorities called them a few minutes before they arrived at Erez Crossing on November 23 to say they did not have clearance to enter Gaza. After they waited several hours at Erez, Maj. Aviad Zilberman told them that they would not be permitted to cross, but gave no explanation for the denial.

12. (C) Nuncio and Patriarchate contacts told PolOff they will attempt to enter Gaza next Sunday, November 30, as Fr. Manuel remains on leave and no other Catholic priest is available to hold Mass. Fr. Khzuz estimated there are about 1,000 Catholics in Gaza, and over 100 had waited for Franco's arrival on November 23. Khzuz complained that he saw ICRC and UN vehicles enter Gaza through Erez while the Nuncio/Patriarchate party waited for clearance, and commented that the Nuncio will protest the denial as contrary to international conventions for diplomatic access as well as an affront to free religious practice.
WALLES